

The Camp Counselor as the Empathetic Listener

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*Paragraphs in italics are from *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

Suppose you've been having trouble with your eyes and you decide to go to your eye doctor for help. After briefly listening to your complaint, he takes off his glasses and hands them to you.

"Put these on," he says. "I've worn this pair of glasses for ten years now and they've really helped me. I have an extra pair at home; you can wear these."

So you put them on, but it only makes the problem worse.

"This is terrible!" you exclaim. "I can't see a thing!"

"Well, what's wrong?" he asks. "They work great for me. Try harder."

"I am trying," you insist. "Everything is a blur."

"Well, what's the matter with you? Think positively."

"Okay. I swear I can't see a thing."

"Boy, are you ungrateful!" he chides. "After all I've done to help you!"

What are the chances you'd go back to that eye doctor the next time you needed help? Not very good. . . You wouldn't have much confidence in someone who doesn't diagnose before he or she prescribes. But how often do we diagnose before we prescribe in communication?

A Lost Opportunity

"Come on, Julie, tell me how you feel. I know it's hard, but I'll try to understand."

"Oh, I don't know. You'd think it was stupid."

"Of course I wouldn't! You can tell me. That's what counselors are for. What's making you so unhappy?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Come on, what is it?"

"Well, if you really want to know, I don't want to go to the dance."

"What?" you respond surprised. "You seriously don't want to go to the dance? The dance is the best part of the week! It's so much fun once you get there. You've just got to get a positive attitude about it, then you'll have a good time."

Pause.

"Now go ahead. Tell me how you're feeling."

We have such a tendency to rush in, to fix things up with good advice. But we often fail to take the time to diagnose, to really, deeply understand the problem first. If we're going to be of any use as counselors at all, we've got to seek to be empathic listeners.

To understand someone we've got to listen to him or her--yet of all the means of communication in life, listening is the one that we've had the least amount of training in. What education have you had that enables you to listen so that you really, deeply understand another human being from that individual's own frame of reference?

Comparatively few people have had any training in listening at all. Being an empathic listener as a counselor involves a deep shift in the way we usually operate, in the way we usually think about ourselves as counselors. We usually seek first to be listened to.

Back to Basics

A certain kind of being listened to is essential. A camp counselor, if nothing else, needs to maintain order within a cabin, keep their campers on schedule and through firm, loving discipline maintain peaceful order within their cabin so that their kids can be learning and having fun. But for most counselors this role of being *listened to* can tap into a larger, usually unspoken desire of the counselor: to make kids like them. This usually takes one of two forms:

- A. "I want my campers to love me and think I'm the greatest counselor." You tell them lots of funny jokes and cool stories. We naturally want this kind of affirmation of being loved.
- B. "I want to make the kids as I am. . . I've got life figured out--I'll tell them what my life has been like and this is how they should act."

These attitudes usually lead us to see ourselves as knowledgeable advice-givers, as "counselors" when we're interacting with our campers when serious issues come up. We've presented ourselves as cool, knowledgeable authority figures, and this can carry over when we have one-on-one "counseling moments" with a camper, if the camper is having a problem. We typically seek mainly to be understood by the camper, not to understand them.

Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. They are either speaking or preparing to speak. They're filtering everything through their own view of life, reading their autobiography into other people's lives.

"I know exactly how you feel!"

"I went through the very same thing. Let me tell you about my experience."

They're constantly projecting their own home movies onto other people's behavior. They prescribe their own glasses for everyone with whom they interact. If they have a problem with someone their attitude is,

"That person just doesn't understand."

So often we are so filled with our own rightness, our own autobiography that our conversations become collective monologues, and we never really understand what is going on inside another human being.

Let's take a step back for a minute and look at some of the "facts" of who we are as Orthodox camp counselors, and what we're doing.

- A. Campers are only usually at camp for a week. Counselors, for the most part, will not have an ongoing relationship with their campers. One of the biggest mistakes we can make is to think we can solve camper problems in this week.
- B. The camp counselor is *not* a trained counselor. A few days of staff training don't train you to responsibly deal with the inner lives of kids. Medical doctors, who are responsible for people's physical lives, go through at least six years of intensive training before they can write prescriptions. Take this example of how easy it is to misdiagnose:

When our daughter Jenny was only two months old, she was sick one Saturday, the day of a football game in our community that dominated the consciousness of almost everyone. It was an important game-some

60,000 people were there. Sandra (my wife) and I would like to have gone, but we didn't want to leave little Jenny. Her vomiting and diarrhea had us concerned. The doctor was at that game. He wasn't our personal physician, but he was the one on call. When Jenny's situation got worse, we decided we needed some medical advice.

Sandra dialed the stadium and had him paged. It was right at a critical time in the game, and she could sense an officious tone in his voice.

"Yes?" he said briskly. "What is it?"

"This is Mrs. Covey, Doctor, and we're concerned about our daughter, Jenny."

"What's the situation?" he asked.

Sandra described the symptoms, and he said,

"Okay, I'll call in a prescription. Which is your pharmacy?"

When she hung up, Sandra felt that in her rush she hadn't really given him full data, but that what she told him was adequate.

"Do you think he realizes that Jenny is just a newborn?" I asked her.

"I'm sure he does," Sandra replied.

"But he's not our doctor. He's never even treated her."

"Well, I'm pretty sure he knows."

"Are you willing to give her the medicine unless you're absolutely sure he knows?"

(Sandra was silent.) "What are we going to do?" she finally said.

"Call him back," I said.

"You call him back," Sandra replied.

So I did. He was paged out of the game once again.

"Doctor," I said, "when you called in that prescription, did you realize that Jenny is just two months old?"

"No!" he exclaimed. "I didn't realize that. It's good you called me back. I'll change the prescription immediately."

It is this easy for doctors to misdiagnose; how much easier it is for camp counselors to ill-advise their campers, saying things without an awareness of the possible repercussions! Licensed counselors have at least a Masters degree. What's more, since our camp is an Orthodox one, the setting is such that our campers are often thinking about their *spiritual* lives. The state of a person's spiritual life is arguably more of a life and death issue than their physical life.

- C. The kids are at camp to learn more about the Orthodox Christian faith--the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Have we spent years studying the Bible so that we can say that we *really* know what the gospel of Jesus Christ is? Someone who is advising/counseling a camper at an Orthodox camp should have been studying Scripture for years so that they can answer from the mind-frame sculpted by the Word of God. Camp counselors need to leave counseling/advising to priests and those with at least half a head of gray hair. We forget sometimes in our American culture that those with true wisdom must be older, with life experience.

Empathetic Listening

When another person speaks, we're usually "listening" at one of four levels. We may be ignoring another person, not really listening at all. We may practice pretending. "Yeah. Uh-huh. Right." We may practice selective listening, hearing only certain parts of the conversation. We often do this when we're

listening to the constant chatter of a preschool child. Or we may even practice attentive listening, paying attention or focusing energy on the words that are being said. But very few of us ever practice the fifth level, the highest form of listening, empathic listening.

Empathic (from empathy) listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel.

Empathy is not sympathy. Sympathy is a form of agreement, a form of judgment. And it is sometimes the more appropriate emotion and response. But people often feed on sympathy. It makes them dependent. The essence of empathic listening is not that you agree with someone; it's that you fully, deeply, understand that person, emotionally as well as intellectually. Empathic listening involved much more than registering, reflecting, or even understanding the words that are said. Communications experts estimate, in fact, that only 10% of our communication is represented by the words we say. Another 30 percent is represented by our sounds, and 60 percent by our body language. In empathic listening, you listen with your ears, but you also, and more importantly, listen with your eyes and with your heart. You listen for feeling, for meaning. You listen for behavior. You use your right brain as well as your left. You sense, you intuit, you feel.

Empathic listening is so powerful because it gives you accurate data to work with. Instead of projecting your own autobiography and assuming thoughts, feelings, motives and interpretation, you're dealing with the reality inside another person's head and heart. You're listening to understand. You're focused on receiving the deep communication of another human soul. Empathic listening is, deeply therapeutic and healing because it gives a person "psychological air."

If all the air were suddenly sucked out of the room you're in right now, what would happen to your interest in reading this? You wouldn't care about it; you wouldn't care about anything except getting air. Survival would be your only motivation.

But now that you have air, it doesn't motivate you. This is one of the greatest insights in the field of human motivation: satisfied needs do not motivate. It's only the unsatisfied need that motivates. Next to physical survival, the greatest need of a human being is psychological air. Next to physical survival, the greatest need of a human being is psychological survival-to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated.

When you listen with empathy to another person, you give that person psychological air. . . This need for psychological air impacts communication in every area of life. . . Seeking first to understand, diagnosing before you prescribe, is hard. It's so much easier in the short run to hand someone a pair of glasses that have fit you so well in the past few years.

Four Autobiographical Responses

Because we listen autobiographically, we tend to respond in one of four ways. We evaluate-we either agree or disagree; we probe-we ask questions from our own frame of reference; we advise-we give counsel based on our own experience; or we interpret-we try to figure people out, to explain their motives, their behavior, based on our own motives and behavior.

These responses come naturally to us. We are deeply scripted in them; we live around models of them all the time. But how do they affect our ability to really understand?

If I'm trying to communicate with a camper, can he/she feel free to open up to me when I evaluate everything he/she says before he/she really explains it? Am I giving the camper psychological air?

And how does my camper feel when I probe? Probing is playing twenty questions. It's autobiographical, it controls, and it invades. It's also logical, and the language of logic is different from the language of sentiment and emotion. You can play twenty questions all day and not find out what's important to someone.

Camper: I've had it with this camp. I hate it here.

Counselor: What's the matter?

Camper: I hate all this church and the sessions and activities--they're boring and stupid.

Counselor: You just can't see the great parts of it yet. I felt the same way when I first came to camp. I remember getting so annoyed by all the rules and stuff. But camp has turned out to be the coolest thing in my life. Just hang in there. Give it some time. (advising)

Camper: I've given it three days and I don't want to be here all week--the activities are stupid and I don't have any friends in my cabin.

Counselor: What do you mean the activities are stupid? They're really fun if you get into them. Have you tried making friends with the other kids in your cabin? (evaluating)

Camper: Yeah, I've tried, they all have their own friends already and they know everybody.

Counselor: It may look that way now, but they all started out just like you. It just takes some effort to get to know people--stick it out. Find out things you have in common with them. (advising)

Camper: I want to be home with my friends, my TV, and my music.

Counselor: Do you realize what a great opportunity it is to be here in the great outdoors, with the lake, all the activities, and we get to learn about our church in a cool setting? (evaluating)

Camper: I know it's supposed to be great, but I'm just not having fun.

Counselor: I'm telling you, try making more of an effort to get to know the kids in your cabin and to listen in the OL and Sounding Board sessions and you'll start to like it." (advising, evaluating)

Camper: Yeah, whatever. I'll see you later.

Obviously, the counselor was well intended. Obviously, he wanted to help. But did he/she begin to really understand?

Let's look more carefully at the camper - not just his words, but also his thoughts and feelings (expressed parenthetically below) and the possible effect of some of the counselors' autobiographical responses.

What's Really Going On

Camper: I've had it with this camp. I hate it here. (*I want to talk with you, to get your attention.*)

Counselor: What's the matter? (*You're interested! Good!*)

Camper: I hate all this church and the sessions and activities--they're boring and stupid. (*I've got a problem with camp, and I feel just terrible.*)

Counselor: You just can't see the great parts of it yet. I felt the same way when I first came to camp. (*Oh no, here comes my counselor's autobiography that we already know from first night devotions. This isn't what I want to talk about. I don't really care how great camp was for them. I want to get to the problem.*) I remember getting so annoyed by all the rules and stuff. But camp has turned out to be the coolest thing in my life. Just hang in there. Give it some time. (*Time won't solve my problem. I wish I could tell you. I wish I could just spit it out.*)

Camper: I've given it three days and I don't want to be here all week--the activities are stupid and I don't have any friends in my cabin.

Counselor: What do you mean the activities are stupid? They're really fun if you get into them. Have you tried making friends with the other kids in your cabin? (*This counselor won't like me if I don't fit in with the rest of the cabin. They won't like me unless I'm loving camp. I have to justify what I just said.*)

Camper: Yeah, I've tried, they all have their own friends already and they know everybody.

Counselor: It may look that way now, but they all started out just like you. (*Oh great, here comes a lecture.*) It just takes some effort to get to know people--stick it out. Find out things you have in common with them. (*How do you know I haven't tried, you've been too busy being buddy-buddy with your counselor friends and the campers you had last year.*)

Camper: I want to be home with my friends, my TV, and my music. (*I've got great friends at home--I fit in with my friends at home.*)

Counselor: Do you realize what a great opportunity it is to be here in the great outdoors, with the lake, all the activities, and we get to learn about our church in a cool setting? (*We're beating around the bush. If you'd just listen, I really need to talk to you about something.*)

Camper: I know it's supposed to be great, but I'm just not having fun. *(Maybe there is something wrong with me.)*

Counselor: I'm telling you, try making more of an effort to get to know the kids in your cabin and to listen in the OL and Sounding Board sessions and you'll start to like it. You're really privileged to be here." *(Oh great, here comes the guilt trip.)*

Camper: Yeah, whatever. I'll see you later.

Can you see how limited we are when we try to understand another person on the basis of words alone, especially when we're looking at that person through our own glasses? Can you see how limiting our autobiographical responses are to a person who is genuinely trying to get us to understand his autobiography?

You will never be able to truly step inside another person, to see the world as he/she sees it, until you develop the empathetic listening skills to do it.

The skills, the tip of the iceberg of empathic listening, involve four developmental stages.

The first and least effective is to mimic content. Without doing this thoughtfully, it can be insulting to people and causes them to close up. It is, however, a first stage skill because it at least causes you to listen to what is being said.

Mimicking content is easy. You just listen to the words that come out of someone's mouth and you repeat them. You're hardly even using your brain at all.

Camper: I've had it with this camp-I hate it here.

Counselor: You've had it with this camp.

You have essentially repeated back the content of what was being said. You haven't evaluated or proved or advised or interpreted. You've at least showed you're paying attention to his words. But to understand, you want to do more.

The second stage of empathic listening is to rephrase the content. It's a little more effective, but it's still limited to the verbal communication.

Camper: I've had it with this camp. I hate it here.

Counselor: You don't want to be at camp anymore.

This time, you've put his meaning into your own words. Now you're thinking about what he said, mostly with the left side, the reasoning, logical side of the brain.

The third stage brings your right brain into operation. You reflect feeling.

Camper: I've had it with this camp. I hate it here.

Counselor: You're feeling really frustrated.

Now you're not paying as much attention to what he's saying as you are to the way he feels about what he's saying. The fourth stage includes both the second and the third. You rephrase the content and reflect the feeling.

Camper: I've had it with this camp. I hate it here.

Counselor: You're really frustrated with this camp.

Frustration is the feeling; camp is the content. You're using both sides of your brain to understand both sides of the camper's communication.

Now, what happens when you use fourth stage empathic listening skills is really incredible. As you authentically seek to understand, you rephrase content and reflect feeling, you give the camper psychological air. You also help them work through their own thoughts and feelings. As they grow in their confidence of your sincere desire to really listen and understand, the barrier between what is going on inside him and what's actually being communicated to you disappears. The camper is not thinking and

feeling one thing and communicating another. They begin to communicate their innermost tender feelings and thoughts.

Camper: I've had it with this camp. I hate it here. *(I want to talk with you, to get your attention.)*

Counselor: You're really frustrated about camp. *(That's right! That's how I feel.)*

Camper: Yeah, I am. I don't think I should be here. I'm not getting anything out of it.

Counselor: You feel like camp is not doing you any good. *(Let me think, is that what I mean?)*

Camper: Well, yeah. Camp is supposed to be fun, but I'm really not having a good time. I think it's because none of my friends are here.

Counselor: You really wish your friends from home were here. *(Well. . .)*

Camper: I guess. The kids in our cabin all think they are so cool-it is really annoying.

Counselor: You feel our cabin is annoying.

Camper: They talk about people all the time-I hear them saying obnoxious things about everyone.

Counselor: They shouldn't be talking about other people.

Camper: I even heard them making fun of that shirt I was wearing yesterday.

Counselor: It really hurt to hear them talking about what you were wearing.

Camper: Yeah, how do they know what's cool in my hometown? I was trying to tell them what it's like-they all kept talking about camp, and I didn't have anything else to say.

What a difference real understanding can make! All the well-meaning advice in the world won't amount to anything if we're not even addressing the real problem. And we'll never get to the problem if we're so caught up in our own autobiography, our own view of life, that we don't take the time to see the world from another point of view. To listen--to really listen--I need to put myself on hold. The listening is not about me, it's about the person I'm listening to.

Camper: Yeah, how do they know what's cool in my hometown? I was trying to tell them what it's like-they all kept talking about camp, and I didn't have anything else to say.

Counselor: You felt excluded because you are new to camp.

Camper: I thought this was supposed to be a Christian camp.

Here is where our job as listening counselors gets tough: assumptions/perceptions of the camper will come up that you may really want to correct-i.e., it's really tempting to advise, "Just because this is a Christian camp doesn't always mean that the people here will act the way they're supposed to." But try to hold off on advice. The chance that you could misdiagnose or say something that might do more harm than it would good is too great.

Camper: I feel like I might as well go home. But I don't want to quit.

Counselor: You feel torn. You're in the middle of a dilemma.

Camper: What do you think I should do?

And this is the other big challenge. If you've been an effective listener, chances are your camper will ask for your advice. Is it finally time to give advice when they ask you? How do we know when I actually can and should give advice? A general rule for measuring this: if at least half of the hairs on my head are gray, then go ahead and state your opinion. Most counselors are too young to give solid advice to campers, no matter how wise people tell them they are. If you're really concerned, you could suggest that the priest and/or camp director is the one they should talk to. The best, safest policy when a camper asks for your input is to ask a gentle question in response. Some great questions might be:

"What do you think I think about this?"

"What do you think I will/should say to you?"

You'll probably be surprised as to what campers come up with. *The key is to genuinely seek the welfare of the individual, to listen with empathy, to let the person get to the problem and the solution at his/her own pace and time. . .*

When people are really hurting and you really listen with a pure desire to understand, you'll be amazed how fast they will open up. They want to open up.

There are people who protest that empathic listening takes too much time. It may take a little more time initially but it will save so much time downstream. The most efficient thing you can do if you're a doctor and want to prescribe a wise treatment is to make an accurate diagnosis. You can't say, "I'm in too much of a hurry. I don't have time to make a diagnosis. Just take this treatment."

Empathic Listening is something camp counselors must learn and practice. When you communicate with campers, put aside your own autobiography and genuinely seek to understand your camper. Even when your campers don't want to open up about their problems, you can be empathic. You can sense their hearts, you can sense the hurt, and you can respond, "You seem down today." They may say nothing; that's okay. You've shown understanding and respect.

Don't push; be patient; be respectful. Campers don't have to open up verbally before you can empathize. You can empathize all the time with their behavior. You can be discerning, sensitive, and aware and you can live outside your autobiography when that is needed.

Instead of trying to devote your energy to trying to solve camper problems, devote it rather to *listening*. Devote it first and foremost to *listening* to the Word of God. All the principles we've been talking about how to put aside our own autobiographies when we're listening to another person can be applied directly to how we read the Bible and hear it read to us in Church--listen to it. Let yourself be formed by it.

And devote your time as a counselor to *listening* to your campers. Listening is a skill. It is hard to listen because we want to filter things through our own view of life--this is quite normal, and usually quite unhelpful. True, empathic listening is basically an act of deep love.

Camp Counseling Magic **Making ordinary moments... extraordinary!**

By Jeffrey Leiken, MA

Greg was a first time camp counselor. He went to college in the Midwest and could teach tennis. There was nothing remarkable about him on the surface. He was a nice guy, got along well with his peers and did what he was asked to do. When the campers arrived though something transpired. Campers from all ages came to congregate around him. Even some of the toughest campers in camp liked him. At his mid-summer evaluation the Head Counselor dared to ask him this question: "What is your secret? What are you doing that all these kids are drawn to you?"

Greg's answer was simple, yet poignant, "I consistently do the little things that matter, and I do them when others don't."

This past winter I facilitated a two-day winter retreat for 20 camp counselors from a Northeast summer camp. The intention was to engage them in activity and dialogue which would gather ideas, suggestions and insights on how to improve their camp. The secondary goal was to get this core group working together as a team to bring a heightened spirit of seriousness and commitment to the staff.

One of the activities I asked of them was to imagine and describe their "ideal camp", specifically what it would look, sound and feel like. Then I asked them to think of a time in their history at camp when it was most like this ideal, and what the factors were that made it so. This led to a rich and vivid sharing of stories, mostly of what they called "peak moments". Most of the stories happened around big events or at the final campfire - the moments where sworn enemies came together, where a homesick nightmarish camper wouldn't let go of his counselor when his parents arrived, of a "loser" camper who grew up to become a Director.